2011

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July 1, 2011 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | Permalink
By Alec Ash

When I left Beijing after two years studying Mandarin at Peking and Tsinghua Universities, my Chinese friends from those universities threw me a leaving dinner at the Cultural Revolution restaurant, far on the outskirts of Beijing, outside the 5th ring road. While punters ate, drank and sang along with Mao era songs, waitresses dressed as Red Guards performed patriotic dances, clutching prop rifles. "Long live Chairman Mao!," the diners would shout, tucking into red-braised pork – good thing this wasn't the Great Leap Forward restaurant, or it would perhaps have been a quarter bowl of rice each. "Death to capitalist roadsters!," as the bill came in at a distinctly capitalist 900 yuan.

This summer, in London, I was reminded of this throwback image of China when I went to an exhibit of propaganda posters from the Mao era, titled *Poster Power*and curated by Harriet Evans for Westminster University. I never thought I would say that London needed more Cultural Revolution, but this is a great collection and a must-see if you're in town. (As is China Beatniks Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Pankaj Mishra discussing the legacy of Mao on July 4th – a strictly unintentional snub to Independence day I'm sure.)

The posters are colourful, bright, and disturbing. "I've found the red flag" reads one (我到了□旗), with an image of a slender Chinese revolutionary ballerina holding the cloth of the flag to her cheek like a lover's palm. "Hong Kong and Britain must be destroyed" proclaims another (港英必□), in angry font underneath an equally angry mob, arms linked, all clutching Mao's little red book. My favourite is a beach scene of young children doing stretches in synch, with smiles that could have been stapled on. 从小□□身体好 – "Exercise from a young age is good."

Many of the posters were originally collected by John Gittings, the writer and China hand. He told me he bought most of them on the streets of Beijing in 1971, when he first visited China, for sums in the region of 1 mao, 8 wen. I can't even begin to approximate what that is in sterling or dollars. Today, maybe a nickel. In 1971 … frankly, I'm too young (25) to even guess.

Were I to begin a collection of posters like these today, from Beijing, it would be easy. They are on sale in *ditan* (street vendor's stands) across the city, spread out on cheap cloth on pedestrian overpasses, or thrust in your face by peddlers at the city's lakeside circus of bright lights and bars. I would buy them for 10 yuan apiece, and they would mostly be fake. If I wanted a real one, perhaps I could go to a backstreet in Qianmen, south of the Forbidden City, and pay through the nose – because no matter how hard I bargain, my skin colour and foreign accent would bargain harder.

And there it is, the great joke: these one-time slogans of Chinese communism are now artefacts of Chinese capitalism, pawned off for the highest price by the sons and daughters of red guards, or perhaps even former red guards themselves. That serene half-smile of the great helmsman looks up helplessly as crisp banknotes – also bearing his face – purchase him for foreign students and tourists, who will pin him to their walls and bring him back home as an ironic gift to friends and family. As John Gittings would say: from Mao to Market.

What these old posters meant to the people they were printed for, in the 60s and 70s, is a nuanced matter for a longer post by a more expert hand. To many, perhaps, they spoke hope and possibility. Kinship with your fellow countryman and woman in the fight for a brave new world. To many, they might still speak this, in the muted voice of nostalgia for a youth which has past. And to others, they might speak with the shrieks of struggle sessions, of family members beaten to death, of homes destroyed, beliefs trampled, children turning on their parents. In this light, "exercise from a young age" doesn't sound quite so innocent.

But what message do they speak now, to the young Chinese of my generation, whose parents found that red flag and clutched that little book to their hearts? I invited a friend from Henan – now finishing his PhD in Cambridge – to the exhibit with me, and asked him. "It's like this is near to me," he said, pointing to the posters around us, "but it's still history, it's not something I experienced. It's 50 years ago, but might as well have been 100 or 200. It's like a fairy tale that you are told by your mum when you're 3 or 4, and now you see the fairy tale again when you're older."

That these posters mean different things to different people is something the exhibit is very conscious of. Harriet Evans, the curator, asked in her opening speech "why is it that images from a radical, even brutal, regime travel across space and time." Travelled they certainly have. One of the most interesting items in the collection is a small postcard, brightly coloured like the rest of them, featuring a bulky Chinese man set in heroic revolutionary pose, a red star badge on his chest. But look closer. Behind him is a giant, neon pink, disco ball. He is pointing to two, bold characters: 晚会. "Party."

The more pertinent question, perhaps, is where they will travel from now. What is the red legacy in today's China, and what will it be in 2020 when China's GDP is forecasted (in the *Economist*'s special report on China) to catch up and then overtake America's? Your gaze might understandably drift to Chongqing for an answer, where Bo Xilai is enjoying the limelight of his so-called "red revival". Residents are encouraged to sing Mao era songs ("Without the Communist Party, there is no new China" and that ilk – read this excellent post from the Granite Studio blog for more nuance), while the Politburo standing committee smiles benevolently from the wings, and wonders whether Mr Bo should join their ranks in 2012.

Is this song and dance in Chongqing … nostalgic? Patriotic? A bit of fun? Dead serious? What of the punters in the Cultural Revolution restaurant? Or "red tourists" in Shaoshan, Mao's home village? By the hundreds they lined up, me with them, to shuffle though Mao's childhood house (which is very large for such a persecutor of the landed gentry). Sometimes this red nostalgia seems completely disassociated from its historical context – like a memento from an old and long-forgotten friend which you don't know why you keep. At other times, it strikes me as a desperate attempt by Chinese of an older generation to find continuity in their lives over the past thirty years of breakneck change.

But that continuity is a ghost. The truth is that the 21st century China I know, which I first saw up close in 2007 at the age of 21, is a world apart from the China of 1971 that John Gittings witnessed. Much more importantly, today's young generation of Chinese live in a country which is different is so many drastic ways to the China their parents grew up in. And, like me, they will never really know what that old China was like. They didn't see it. Their parents prefer not to talk about it (why burden your child?). They have poor access to an impartial history of it, and no real reason to look back.

Which raises an uncomfortable question. To the leaders of tomorrow's China, are the lessons of its yesterday just a fairy tale?

Alec Ash writes the new blog the curious Ant and is on Twitter at @alecash. Read stories of his days in Beijing at Six.